

GERT DE RUIJTER FACES & SHADOWS

Remembering Gert De Ruijter

"The free soul is rare, but you know it when you see it - basically because you feel good, very good, when you are near or with them."

-Charles Bukowski -

I got to know Gert De Ruijter around 1989 as an old schoolfriend of my girlfriend at the time. Both had studied photography at the Antwerp Academy of Fine Arts. Gert had moved back to Amsterdam though, but always kept and maintained his connections with friends in Antwerp, as indeed he did with his network of friends around Europe. He came to visit and stayed for a couple of days on a regular basis. Antwerp has more of a small town feel than the cold anonymous metropole Amsterdam, with its junkies, petty thieves and its soft and hard drug mafia – the price of being then the most tolerant city in Europe. But this tolerance also made Amsterdam a vibrant canvas of colorful characters: bums, street artists, homeless gold diggers, and straight-out lunatics. This was Gert's visual hunting ground, where he sought to capture in photographic imagery the essence of what it means to be alive.

Musicians fascinated Gert, particularly jazz musicians and improvised music performers, artist escaping the rigid structures of conformity, seemingly freely channeling the music of the spheres. The same freedom he found in the characters roaming the Amsterdam city streets: the misfits, magicians, bums and drop-outs. He portrayed these people with respect and sensitivity. Gert documented all this with his analogue 6X6 Rolleiflex camera in grainy, grey toned slices of life. His images appeared in several music magazines, but not regularly enough to be able to make a living out of photography, thus most of the time he lived off welfare. However, this gave him the time and opportunity to roam the streets and hunt for images, in the narrow realm where a sense of wonder, of beauty and of tragedy overlap.

One of Gert's most renowned photographs is his portrait of the tragic hero and jazz trumpeter Chet Baker, taken when Baker was just leaving a squat known for catering to heroin addicts. This image, along with a striking shot of Bob Marley on stage, was published as a postcard by Art Unlimited Amsterdam.

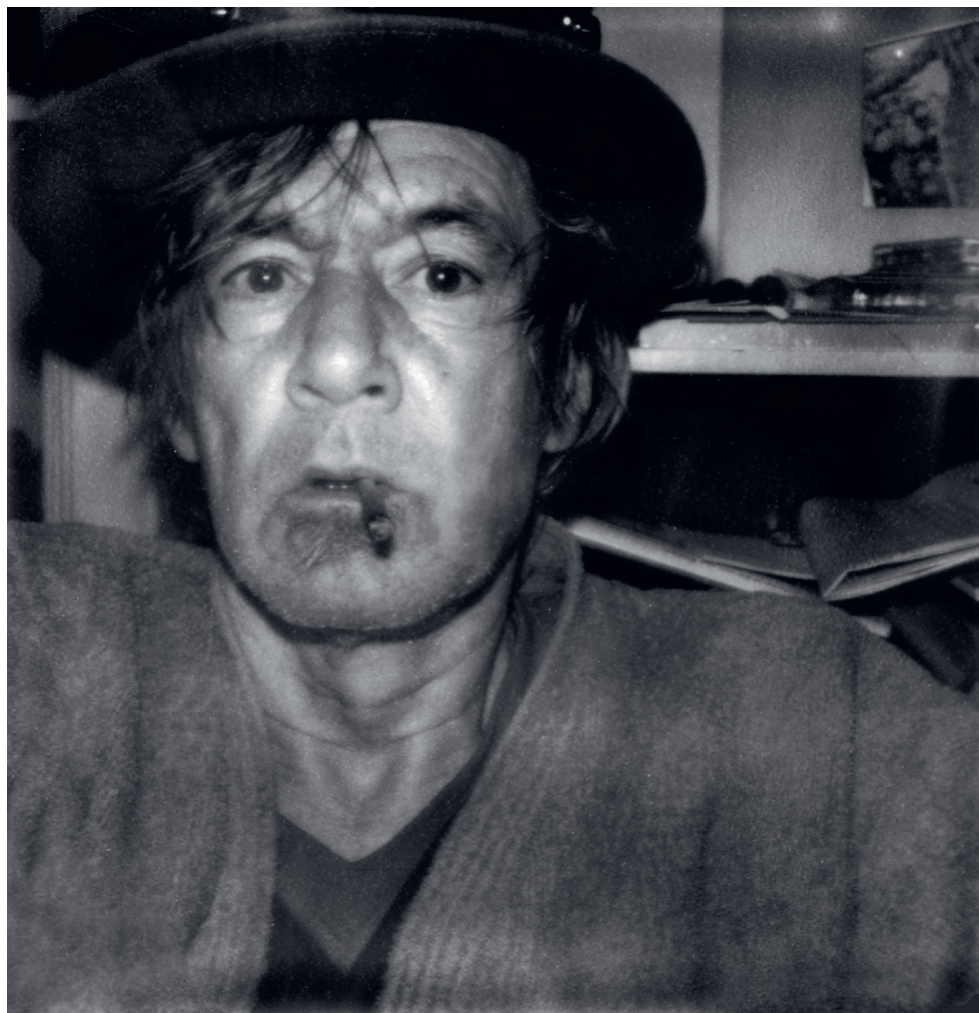
When Gert became a father and had to take on a job as a call center operator I somewhat lost contact with him. He visited less frequently and I didn't make the trip to Amsterdam as often as I would have liked to. A settled life however was not Gert's natural habitat, who feared but envied in equal measure the lifestyle of the outcast. He must have felt trapped by the responsibility of family life, seeking refuge in bars and café's of the seamy side, eventually costing him the total disintegration of the relations with his son's mother, his son Roman and also with his sister.

After this difficult phase in his life Gert started to visit more often again, but something in him was broken. He missed his son who had moved with his mother back to Canada, and he felt abandoned and lost. His health started to deteriorate, he was not living a healthy lifestyle. He did make photos still, though rarely analogue, more digital snaps, but always with that undeniable Gert De Ruijter quality. Gert had always hankered to be free, to live like a bird, to be able to fly away when situations threatened to escape his control. Gert flew to the hereafter, impoverished and isolated due to the Covid pandemic, on September 2002, leaving behind an as yet unlocked treasure trove of photographic evidence of the state of the human condition in the late 20th to early 21st centuries.

I miss him.

Eddy Gabriel
May, 2025, Antwerp

E.G. (born 1962 in Hasselt, Belgium is a visual artist /graphic designer, living in Antwerp, Belgium).



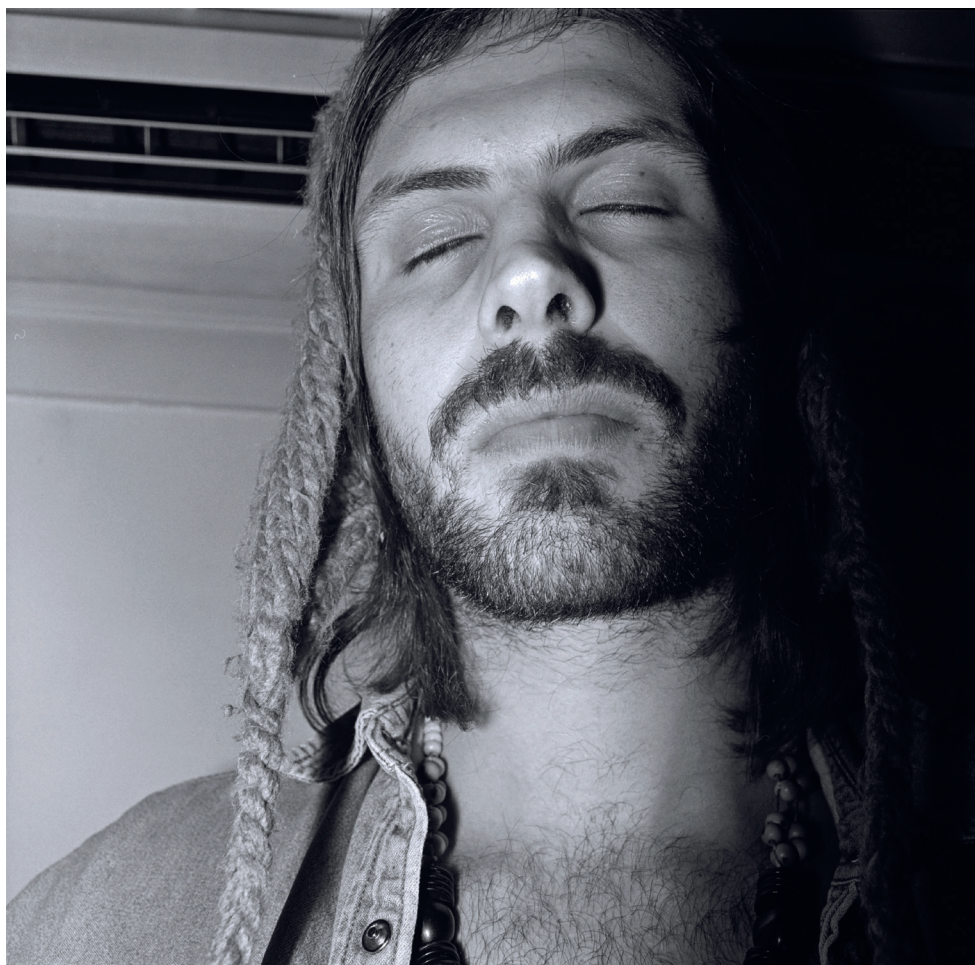


Boy with the ice-scream





Portrait of the young man with woolen hat #1





Two girls in Vondelpark

















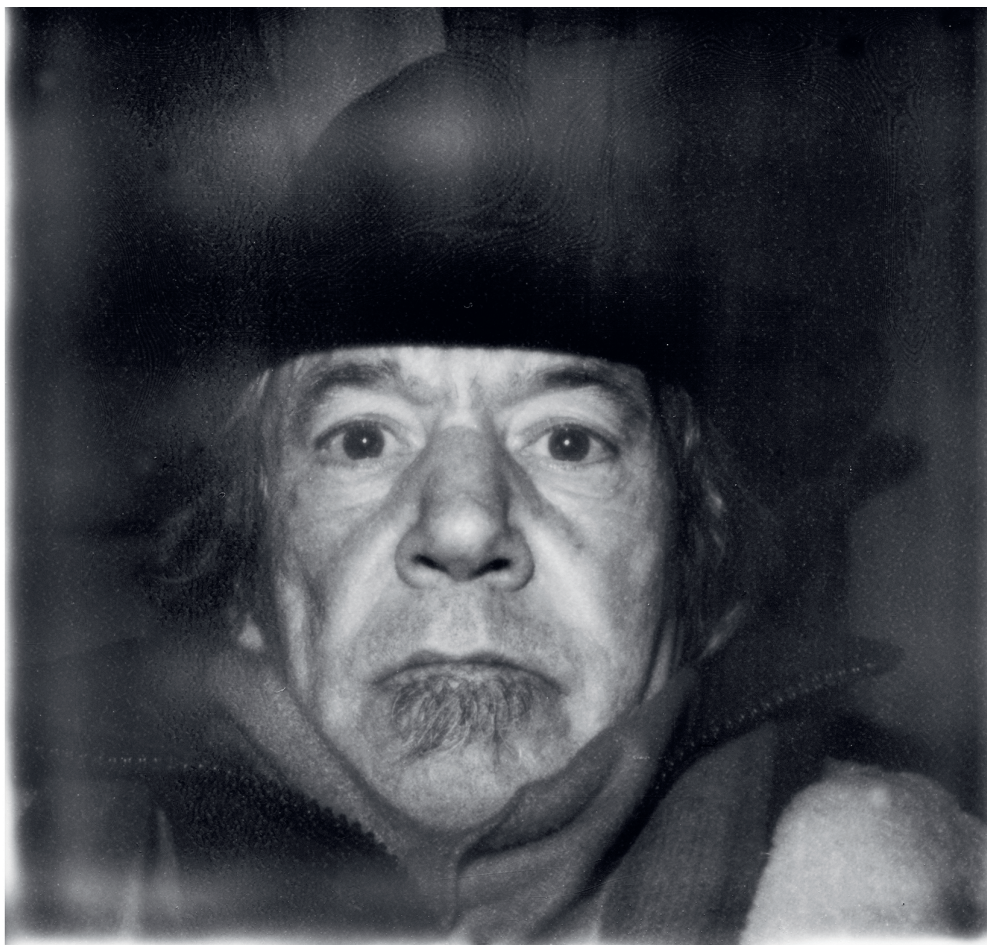
Chet Baker in Amsterdam, September 22, 1987













Barefoot man on the bridge, Amsterdam







Vzpomínka na Gerta

„Svobodná duše je vzácná, ale když se s ní setkáte, tak to poznáte – protože když jste s ní nebo v její blízkosti, bude vám dobře, moc dobře.“

-Charles Bukowski -

Gerta De Ruijtera jsem potkal kolem roku 1989 jako spolužáka mé tehdejší přítelkyně. Oba studovali fotografii na antverpské Královské akademii výtvarných umění. Gert se sice po škole odstěhoval zpátky do Amsterdamu, ale kontakty s přáteli v Antverpách, stejně jako se sítí svých přátel po celé Evropě, udržoval. Pravidelně své přátele navštěvoval a pobýval s nimi pár dní. Antverpy mají spíš maloměstskou atmosféru, na rozdíl od chladné anonymní metropole, jakou je Amsterdam se svými feťáky, zlodějíčky a drogovou mafii. Je to cena, kterou Amsterdam platí za to, že byl zřejmě nejtolerantnějším evropským městem. Díky tomu zde ale vzniklo vibrující tkanivo barvitých postav – tuláků, pouličních umělců, bezdomovců, zlatokopů a naprostých šilenců – a pro Gerta se stalo jeho „lovištěm obrazů“, ve kterém se objektivem snažil zachytit podstatu toho, co vlastně znamená „být naživu“.

Gerta fascinovali umělci, překračující rigidní struktury konformity a jakoby samovolně usměrňující hudbu sfér – hudebnici, hlavně ti jazzoví a improvizující. Podobnou volnost nacházel také v postavách potulujících se po amsterodamských ulicích: různých outsidersch, kouzelnících, tuláčích a ztroskotancích. Zobrazoval je s respektem a citlivě a analogovým foťákem Rolleiflex 6x6 zrnitými šedými řezy do života zachycoval jejich tváře. Gertovy snímky občas vycházely v různých hudebních časopisech, ovšem ne tak pravidelně, aby se fotografováním mohl živit, takže většinou žil na sociální podpoře. To mu na druhé straně poskytovalo čas a příležitost k toulkám ulicemi a možnost pohybu v úzké skulině, ve které při hledání obrazů dokázal uplatnit svůj talent pro úžas, krásu a tragédii.

Jeho možná nejznámější fotografií je portrét nešťastného hrdiny – jazzového hráče na trubku Cheta Bakera. Vznikla v momentě, kdy Chet vycházel ze squatu, ve kterém bylo zázemí pro závislé na heroinu. Stejně jako úchvatný portrét Boba Marleyho na pódiu vyšel tento snímek jako pohlednice v nakladatelství Art Unlimited Amsterdam.

Když se Gert stal otcem a musel se začít žít jako spojuvateľ v call centru, ztratili jsme spolu trochu kontakt. Už mě tak často nenavštěvoval a já za ním do Amsterdamu také nejezdil tak často, jak bych si býval přál. Pro Gerta nebyl rodinný život přirozeným prostředím. Života vyvrhel se sice bál, ale zároveň jim záviděl. Musel se cítit uvězněn pocitem zodpovědnosti za rodinu, a tak hledal únik v pochybných nočních barech a kavárnách. To nakonec způsobilo naprostý rozpad vztahu s jeho přítelkyní, synem Romanem i sestrou.

Po těžké životní fázi mě začal Gert navštěvovat častěji, ale něco se v něm zlomilo. Cítil se opuštěný a ztracený, stýskalo se mu po synovi, který se s matkou přestěhoval zpátky do Kanady. Zdraví se mu začalo zhoršovat, přestal o sebe pečovat. Pořád ještě fotografoval, i když jen zřídka na analog, spíš digitálně. Stále ale s tou nepopiratelnou kvalitou Gerta de Ruijtera. Vždy snil o svobodě, o životě, jakým žijí ptáci. Toužil – když se mu situace vymykala kontrole – někam odletět. Nakonec se mu, zbídačenému a osamělému kvůli pandemii covidu, povedlo v září 2022 odletět na druhý břeh. Nechal po sobě dodnes nezpracovanou pozůstalost fotografického svědectví o stavu lidstva na přelomu dvacátého a jednadvacátého století.

Chybí mi.

Eddy Gabriel
25. května 2025, Antverpy

*E. G. (*1962, Hasselt) je vizuální umělec a designer,
žije v Antverpách.*







Petertje

If an exceptional photographer takes an exceptional photograph for a work, it is a great event. Something like this happened to photographer Gert De Ruijter in January 1999. But this is not the real reason I want to mention this photograph and its creator. What I consider remarkable about it is the consistently disused composition — built from the content, not formal rules — and primarily the relationship between the taker of the image, the person portrayed, and the portraying itself.

Petertje is the name of one of the nameless: junkies, drunkards, gamblers, the homeless. All told, they may be the freer ones; liberated by addiction from dependence on most conventions tying up mainstream society.

*It is not easy to guard the line
between the portraying
and portrayed.
Especially when you don't care
about it at all.
(The Book of Sighs)*

Gert is a photographer who does not take pictures of people from marginalized social groups as objects but as self-portraits. If applied in good faith, this emotionally demanding approach results in the impossibility of producing a quantity of pictures, let alone a series, unless one wants to get a routine job working with people. Experienced. Profound. And so it happens that the portrayed carry the same weight as the heard: Petertje, for example, developed an original theory claiming that a number of problems in the world today could be blamed on an education that emphasizes preference and the continuous perfecting of one hand. Ambidexterity (both-handedness — or, literally, both-right-handedness) is the name of the salvation principle for the future. If a person is made to use both hands in balance, the brain will be balanced as well. Such a person will achieve inner calm and there will come Peace on Earth.

This is one of the things that the Petertje thinks and dreams about. Having only one eye further unbalances him. (This information may be necessary for people who need things to be articulated so that they can understand and appreciate the composition of a photograph.) Made of the same glass Gert lives and works through, Petertje is able pop his other eye out and show it without ado; if you gain his trust.

Martin Zet
23:29, December 23, 2000, in Libušín
Translated by Jeffrey A. Buehler



Petertje, January 1999
(There was nevertheless some discussion going on in 2025:
is it the right photograph of Petertje, or not? Only Gert and
Petertje would know, and they took this secret with them.)

Gert (Gerrit) de Ruijter was born 1954 in Amstelveen, and died in September 2022 in Amsterdam. In his childhood he often travelled with his parents abroad. In 1982, he graduated from the studio of photography at the Antwerp Royal Academy of Arts, and since then he has focused mainly on documentary black-and-white analog photography. He collaborated with Dutch and British music magazines as *Oor*, *Vinyl*, or *Wire*, which occasionally published his portraits of jazz, rock and other musicians (Chet Baker, Bob Marley, Fela Kuti, Gil Scott-Heron, John Cage). He liked to get involved in the stories of night life, especially in the Amsterdam where he lived. He was interested in and often engaged with those who lived on the fringes of society: the homeless, drunkards, travelers, street musicians, prostitutes, vagabonds, Roma, junkies and skinheads. Coherence reigned as well in the way he approached such tragic antiheroes and antiheroines, how they appeared on his photographs and in the techniques. The camera he wore to be ready around his neck was worn out and scratched, his photos often looked distorted and taken from an unusual perspective, overexposed, underexposed, grainy, choppy and brownish. He consciously reinforced this sloppy aesthetics to reach the balance between form and content. De Ruijter's works are in the collections of the Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris, the Musée de Photographie Fribourg, the FOMU in Antwerp and many private collections. He participated since 1993 in several symposia in Plasy and documented there. He used to travel back to the Czech Republic whenever he could afford it. If he couldn't, he at least used to send hundreds of photos by mail or by email to everyone he met here. And he loved regularly to call us. Maybe many of us may not have deleted his photos from our hard drives? In September 2022, Gert died in solitude in a nursing home after a long illness.



Gert (Gerrit) de Ruijter (*1954 Amstelveen, +2022 Amsterdam).

V dětství často pobýval s rodiči v zahraničí. V roce 1982 absolvoval studium v ateliéru fotografie na antverpské Královské akademii umění a od té doby se věnoval především dokumentární černobílé analogové fotografii. Spolupracoval s nizozemskými a britskými hudebními časopisy (*Oor, Vinyl, Wire*), které občas publikovaly jeho portréty jazzových, rockových a dalších hudebníků (Chet Baker, Bob Marley, Fela Kuti, Gil Scott-Heron, John Cage). S Gustem sledoval příběhy nočního života, zejména toho hospodského v Amsterdamu, kde žil. Zajímal se a rád seznamoval s lidmi žijícími na okraji: bezdomovci, pijáky, travelery, Romy, pouličními muzikanty, prostitutkami, tuláky, feťáky či skinheady. Mezi tím, jak k těmto často tragickým antihrdinům a antihrdinkám přistupoval, a tím, jak na jeho fotografiích vypadají, tedy samotnou technickou stránkou portrétů, vládla přísná soudržnost: také jeho fotoaparát, připravený většinou na krku pod bundou, byl ošuntělý a poškrábaný a jeho snímky většinou vypadají tak nějak zkresleně, jako by byly pořízeny z nezvyklé perspektivy, byly přesvícené, podexponované, zrnité, špatně ustálené, zahnědlé. Jeho fotografie jsou součástí sbírek Francouzské národní knihovny, Muzea umění a historie ve Fribourgu, FOMU v Antverpách a mnoha sbírek soukromých. Od roku 1993 se účastnil sympozií v Plasech, které také dokumentoval. Do Česka se vracel, pokud si to mohl dovolit. Když ne, alespoň všem těm, které potkával, často a s chutí telefonoval nebo poštou či e-mailem posílal stovky svých fotografií. Mnozí z nás je možná dodnes nevymazali. V září 2022 Gert po dlouhém strádání v ústavu pro dlouhodobě nemocné v osamění zemřel.

BALÓNEK PRO GERTA



m. Palla

